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rainy afternoon



They held a gun on me. What they wanted was a little fun—with my wife.

By JACK RITCHIE

THERE WASN'T anything I could do about it, so I shuffled the cards again for another hand of solitaire.

The tall one called Hank leaned on the cabin window still watching the rain, and the man who gave orders had his eyes on Annette.

She met his stare for awhile and then she looked away.

"You can call me Pete, baby," he said grinning.

Hank left the window and picked up the satchel. He emptied it on the table. And his lips mumbled as he started counting the money.

I bent down to pick up some

cards that had fallen from the table. "Twenty-four thousand and two hundred," I said. "It didn't melt."

"I didn't ask for you to talk," Hank said.

Pete tilted his chair and looked at me. "What do you find in a place way out here that makes it worthwhile, besides her?"

"I don't like to be crowded," I said.

Pete's interest went back to Annette. "How about you? What keeps you here, baby? Is he that good looking to you?"

Annette moved out of his line of sight. "Don't let it

worry you," she said to him.

Pete turned his chair. "Think about all this money," he said. "And think about all the things it could buy."

Hank riffled a stack of hundreds. "I'd like to know, Bud," he said. "How do you scratch a living in a place like this?"

I transferred a black seven to a red eight and studied the layout.

"The man asked you a question," Pete said. "Answer it."

Annette told him. "He does trapping."

Pete's fist spun me off the chair. "I'd like to hear you tell it."

I got up and stood there tasting the split lip with my tongue. The automatic in Pete's hand was waiting for me to argue.

I sat down in the chair. "I do trapping," I said.

They had come out of the driving rain two hours ago, with their satchel and their guns. They settled down to wait for a break in the weather, and my 30/06 lay in its rack unloaded and ornamental.

HANK FINISHED his counting and stared at the

pile of money. "How about some light?"

Annette lit the lantern and slipped the handle over the ceiling hook.

"I like the way you move, baby," Pete said.

Annette's face was white. "Stop calling me baby."

Pete showed uneven teeth as he laughed. "Sure, baby, sure."

Hank paused as he put the money back in the bag. "You have any dough in that bank?" he asked me.

"A few hundred," I said. "It's covered by insurance."

Hank thought about it and nodded. "Not bad. Nobody loses but the insurance company."

Pete rubbed his stomach. "I'm hungry. Fix up some sandwiches."

Annette went to the cupboard and brought out the bread, butter, and ham.

"Too bad you ain't got a car," Hank said. "We could be out of here."

"It bothers me too," I said. Pete's eyes left Annette for a moment and went to Hank. "I'll remember you nearly killed us."

Hank shrugged. "The road was lousy. And you're the one

who wanted speed," he said.

Annette put a plate of sandwiches on the table and then brought the cups and coffee.

Hank picked up a sandwich. "I saw a bottle on one of them shelves," he said.

Annette paused for a thoughtful moment, but she brought the whiskey and glasses.

They ate slowly and when they finished there was one sandwich left on the plate. "Eat it," Pete said to me.

I pushed the cards together for another hand.

Annette touched my shoulder. "Eat it, Sam," she said.

I picked up the sandwich and ate.

Pete poured himself a shot. "I'm serious, baby," he said. "How about it? I got money now and it won't make me mad to spend it."

Annette reached for the empty plate and the cups.

"I can make lots of excitement," Pete said. He put his hand on her, and she stiffened. I shifted in my chair.

Pete laughed as she walked away.

The beat of the rain on the roof speeded up. Pete was smiling, thinking, to himself. Hank finally yawned, and

Pete had his mind made up.

"Keep awake for awhile, Hank," he said. "I'll be in the bedroom."

Hank yawned again. "Don't dream all night. I need sleep too."

"I won't be sleeping," Pete said.

The sodden oaks outside creaked with the wind. I put down the cards I was holding.

Pete looked over his shoulder at Annette. "You ready, baby?"

Annette's face was pale, and I got to my feet to face their automatics.

"A man with a bullet in his chest coughs real hard," Pete said, smiling.

I looked at their waiting and I knew I was going to try.

Annette stepped quickly in front of me and put her arms around my neck. "No," she whispered. "It won't help. You know that."

"Be a hero," Pete said softly.

"Please," Annette's voice was soft. Her lips met mine lightly, and she held me tight. "It won't matter that much."

She let go of me and went into the bedroom.

Pete followed her in, shut the door, and I sat down to

RAINY AFTERNOON

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watch the .45 in Hank's hand.

"I might take my turn too," Hank said after a time.

THE SOUND of the rain was slackening, and I watched Hank as we listened. My hands absently shuffled the deck of cards.

And in a little while we could hear them.

Hank's eyes moved slightly to the bedroom door, and he began to smile, think ahead.

He was dreaming about it, and I waited for the clouding in his eyes and was ready.

I threw the cards at his face. As he ducked, instinctively, my hands shot across the three feet of table top and clamped on his gun hand. I twisted until he was staring, with horror, into the muzzle of the gun. My hands pressed his finger until the trigger moved back and the gun exploded.

He kicked over the table as he fell and died.

I snatched up the gun, aware of the strong stink of cordite. I stood ready.

NEVER TRUST A DAME

He had left the girl in the car for just a few minutes, Charles E. Fisher, a sailor, told police.

But when he returned, the girl known to him as "Shirley" was gone—and so was his car.

Pete pulled open the bedroom door, angrily, and then he saw it wasn't Hank standing there.

I looked past his naked shoulders to where Annette lay on the bed. Her eyes met mine, and then she turned her face away.

I motioned Pete slowly into the kitchen. His mouth was working desperately for words, but failing to make a sound.

The fear in him watched as I picked up the whiskey bottle by the neck and smashed its bottom on the table.

Whiskey gushed to the floor, and I put the automatic in my pocket.

Pete backed up until there was no place to go. His body shrank as he saw the jagged edges of the bottle come closer. There was the fascination of terror as his eyes clung to the gleaming sharp claws of glass that would rip and tear.

And then I began killing him.

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